

THE PEACEMAKER

student edition

Handling Conflict without
FIGHTING BACK or
Running Away

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INTRODUCTION

God invites you to be a peacemaker. In fact, he wants you and every Christian alive to master his way of handling conflict.

For most of my adult life I (Ken) have been a lawyer and full-time Christian mediator, a specialist in bringing peace to every kind of conflict, from personal lawsuits and business disputes to family issues like divorce and custody battles. I have intervened in neighborhood feuds, church splits, and friend-on-friend fights.

Because you're a breathing human being, you know what conflict feels like at home and school, between friends and strangers. You also know its devastating results. Whenever people lock horns, relationships can be seriously wounded. Conflicts steal time, energy, money, and opportunities for better things. When Christians are fighting, our battles overshadow anything we try to tell the world about Jesus.

In a world full of pain, God wants to involve you in spreading peace. This book will outfit you with a four-step process for handling all kinds of clashes. We call it "The Four G's of Peacemaking":

Introduction

G1: Glorify God.

How can I honor God in this situation?

G2: Get the log out of your eye.

How can I own my part of this conflict?

G3: Gently restore.

How can I help others own their contribution to this clash?

G4: Go and be reconciled.

How can I pass along God's forgiveness and help reach a reasonable solution?

I'm a husband and a dad, a boss and a Christian. In every area of life I have seen these steps turn maddening conflicts into opportunities to grow closer to both people and God. Because I know the Bible's plan for peacemaking, conflict doesn't scare me. In fact, the barriers others consider most overwhelming I see as some of life's most interesting moments. I aim to meet every conflict head-on and as nothing less than an opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and grow to be like Christ.

That outlook might seem risky, if not death-defyingly stupid. But if you're willing to let God train you to be a peacemaker, you can learn responses to conflict that will work in every situation in your real life. You will discover

- When you should overlook mistreatment
- How to admit wrongs
- When to defend your rights
- How to correct others
- When to forgive
- How to strike fair bargains
- What you can do with unreasonable people

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- How you can use conflict to showcase God's love and power

The principles you will learn apply to every part of your life; and to help you make all of this practical, key points are reinforced with real-life illustrations. The names of the people involved and unique facts about their stories have been changed to protect the innocent—and the guilty. We have also included at the end of the book some questions for you to think about and discuss with others. Use these to help you learn and see how what we are talking about applies to your own life.

Peacemaking is a daring act of obedience to God. Learning these skills won't lead you to a fairy-tale world of perfect relationships. Yet we promise that you will discover how to do relationships right and enjoy friendships unmatched anywhere else. And once you have experienced that, you won't want to settle for anything less.

G1: GLORIFY GOD



So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

After weeks of watching students come and go from a locker a few feet from hers, Alyssa did what her school's assistant principal had coached everyone to do in freshman orientation. She texted the locker number to the office. Within an hour the school's police liaison found a stash of weed. Alyssa received the promised fifty-dollar reward, and the student caught with drugs was fast-tracked to a one-year expulsion.

Alyssa didn't care about the cash. She reported the student because she hadn't felt safe. Yet when other students concluded she was the one who had "quick-fiftied" her classmate, she was openly threatened.

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For Alyssa, doing the right thing turned out all wrong. Pleasing adults infuriated her peers. Solving one conflict created a raft of others. Doing what she was supposed to do didn't work.

You Can't Dodge Conflict

Conflict is unavoidable, but maybe you have picked up the idea that being a good person will help you steer clear of life's major clashes. People won't bug you. Or disrespect you. Or set out to destroy you. Or maybe you have been taught that if you do run afoul of others, turning to God for help will instantly and automatically make everything better.

There's no doubt that God makes you wise so you can avoid plunging headfirst into unnecessary disasters. And the Bible promises that God truly cares about what plagues you. Despite these rock-solid truths, no life is trouble-free. Conflict, in fact, is a certainty of life that you can't escape.

Whatever clashes you face, you *can* count on God for solutions for getting along—ways to deal with everyone from your best friends to your most terrifying foes. Still, you need more than half-truths and guesses about how his plan works. You need his whole story on dealing with people. That's what this book is about. It offers wisdom on how you can give every relationship in your life an entirely different outlook.

You Can Choose to Glorify God

Something significant happens when you decide to follow God's instructions for relationships, especially his insights on conflict. When you focus on him and his ways, you do more than cope. When you choose to study and act on God's plans in every area of your existence, you're living for his glory. It's

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what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote, “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Glory is a biblical word for the essence of God. To “glorify God” means you bring attention to, display, and reveal his perfection. You point with your own life to the enormity of his wisdom, power, and compassion.

When you glorify God by doing relationships according to his plan, you’re allowing God to reign in your life. You’re enjoying a powerful connection that alters your whole life. And it’s all far more than personal. You’re also giving everyone around you a reason to respect and praise God’s fame.

Picture God’s glory as something concrete—an amazing car, for instance. Not some junker like the ones that litter high school parking lots everywhere but something one-of-a-kind exotic. That car is no less glorious if you keep it in the garage. Its perfection doesn’t change. But as long as you keep it sheltered, you and your world miss out.

Truth is, if you owned that dream vehicle, you would constantly scan for venues to let everyone see it. To get it out. To let people ogle every millimeter of screaming color, glass, and rubber.

So maybe you would roll it out of the garage and park it in your driveway. That would be a start.

But your car is meant for even more than that. For all anyone knows, it’s just a metal shell with no engine. That car is designed for action. As long as it stays parked, you won’t experience the joy of driving a perfect machine. Only when you shift into drive can you feel its tires grip winding canyon roads. Or hear its engine hum through mountain switchbacks. Or get the rush of flooring it over the flatlands—within the posted speed limit, of course. But as long as that vehicle sits still, no one can catch sight of its true greatness.

God’s glory is far more significant than the most spectacular racer, coupe, or truck you could ever own, and only when you act on God’s truth is it fully on display. Glorifying God

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is an opportunity not for you to parade your own splendor but for you to showcase your amazing Master.

When you live according to God's insights, you enter into the best kind of life he has planned for you. He teaches you how to plot a course through life's most challenging circumstances. No matter what you face, you can choose a radical stance: glorifying God in everything you do.



Your Amazing Opportunity

His master replied, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Matthew 25:21

It’s not tough to spot conflict in the world. Conflict invades every part of life—even *your* life:

- You clash with a friend who has incredibly strong opinions. You try hard to see her point, but she doesn’t care much about yours.
- You resent the coach who sidelines you for a missed play. You want to mouth off, but you also want to keep your spot on the team.
- You have a sibling so unlike you that you wonder how you were born to the same parents. The hurts between you are the thickest walls in the house.

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- You're trapped in a running feud with a peer, bickering to prove who is better, stronger, or smarter.
- Your parents set boundaries you don't think you need. They say "safe"; you say "overprotective."
- You rage inside at a boss who manipulates you to work long, late hours you can't handle.
- You get caught in the crossfire of racial battles in your school or neighborhood.
- You're baffled by a teacher famous for confusing lectures. When you ask for help, you get treated like you're the idiot.

You might conclude that every clash is bad, a threat that will inevitably leave you damaged. Or you might view conflict as an obstacle to smash through, even if you injure others in the process. But what if you looked at conflict with a radically different perspective? What if you thought of it as an opportunity to demonstrate respect for God and win benefits for everyone involved?

Human beings deal with conflict in three ways. You can:

- *Fake peace.* You escape, making things look good by pasting on a smile and shrugging that you're okay.
- *Break peace.* You attack, tearing up relationships to get what you want.
- *Make peace.* You work it out, aiming to resolve clashes by searching out solutions that create real justice and authentic harmony.

You can picture these responses to conflict as a curve, like a hill. On the left slope are *peacefaking* (or *escape*) responses to conflict. On the right side are *peacebreaking* (or *attack*) responses. In the center are *peacemaking* (or *work-it-out*) responses.



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In every conflict you face, your response plants you somewhere on that hill. But imagine it's slick with ice, so that moving too far from the center sends you skidding—maybe left, maybe right. The farther you go, the easier it is to lose your footing and fall into more extreme reactions. Understanding this slippery slope can help you spot broken ways you might deal with conflict.

Broken Way #1: Peacefaking

Living in the peacefaking zone means you choose tactics to make things feel okay even when they're not.

It starts with *denial*, pretending conflict doesn't exist. If you're any good at acting, your smiles can fool people—maybe even yourself. While denial smoothes a situation for a while, it's no permanent fix.

Picture the next step in peacefaking: *blaming*. You admit there's a problem, yet you attempt to escape by pointing the finger at others. Whenever you cover your tracks, falsely claim innocence, or lie about your contribution to the problem, you're playing the blame game.

Flight is another way of escape. You might cut off a friend or slam the door on a boyfriend or girlfriend. Or you ditch a job or quit an activity. At times you have a legitimate reason to flee, like taking a break to cool off or to escape real danger (more on that in chapter 7). But most of the time your exit just delays a real solution.

People who are impossibly calm, agreeable, and sweet often aren't what they seem. They might just be squirming out of conflict by faking peace. Take this extreme example: In middle school Jesse won praise for overcoming a learning disability to earn Bs and Cs, but by high school he fell behind. When peers mocked his troubles, he cracked jokes about himself. Failing school wasn't his only issue. He never told anyone about his parents' constant battles

Your Amazing Opportunity

Peacefaking in the Bible

- *Denial*. Look at 1 Samuel 2:22–25 for an account of a dad ignoring his sons' sleazy behavior.
- *Blaming*. Adam and Eve try to dodge responsibility in Genesis 3:12–13.
- *Flight*. See Genesis 16:6–8 for an obvious example of running from conflict.
- *Suicide*. In 1 Samuel 31:4 the wounded king Saul kills himself to escape capture by his enemies.

at home or that their divorce was why he suddenly left town. One morning a few months after the move, Jesse's mom found him dead in his bedroom. From the outside Jesse had looked fine, but he had walled himself up in his pain.

When people lose all hope of resolving conflict, they sometimes take that deadly leap: *suicide*. Maybe escaping your problems by ending your life has never entered your mind, but too many of your peers see peace as totally out of reach. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide has rocketed to the third leading cause of death among adolescents.¹

Denial, blaming, flight, and suicide are all peacefaking—pretending there is tranquility when there isn't.

Broken Way #2: Peacebreaking

On the opposite end of the slippery slope is peacebreaking, an attempt to make a situation go your way at all costs. Unless you walk through life with your eyes shut and your ears plugged, you witness a multitude of these attack responses each day.

Slams are when you use humor or sarcasm to clobber people from the side or when you aim insults and other

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Peacebreaking in the Bible

- *Insults*. See Nehemiah 4:1–3 for putdowns that come off as both fierce and ridiculous.
- *Gossip*. Check Proverbs 16:28 for the result of backbiting.
- *Fighting*. John 18:10 shows a violent reaction to conflict.
- *Murder*. In Acts 6:8–15 a group of religious rulers silence Stephen, an early church leader, by stoning him to death.

vicious words straight at your opponents. Excusing yourself by saying “I didn’t mean it” or “I was just joking” doesn’t undo the damage you cause.

Gossip is when you speak those cutting words behind people’s backs. Granted, sometimes you need input from others on how to handle a clash. But there’s a huge difference between searching out wisdom and backstabbing.

Words obviously aren’t the only way people break peace. Know anyone who plays mind games, bullying through manipulation and intimidation? Or people who talk with their fists or other violent acts? All of those attempts to resolve conflict by force can be lumped together as *fighting*.

In the extreme, peacebreaking ends in *murder*. You don’t have to catch much news to realize that murder happens everywhere, even close to home. The FBI reports that for every one hundred thousand people, there are five or six killings each year. Even so, murder probably feels distant. Unreal. Jesus, however, said that hatred toward another human is a close cousin of actual murder (see Matt. 5:21–22).

Going into attack mode isn’t just a guy thing. Peacebreaking happens whenever people care less about a relationship than about winning an argument, asserting their rights, or getting what they want.

Leaving Broken Ways

Peacemakers see all of the peacefaking and peacebreaking that surrounds them and want to carve a better path through life. They recognize that they need to put an end to the status quo and leave broken ways behind.

Cassie, a high school junior, had always controlled her peers with biting words and harsh glances. She acted like life was one giant parade thrown in her honor, and no one had ever dared to challenge her by telling her to her face that they felt put down and manipulated.

One afternoon Cassie was transporting a load of friends in her family's SUV. When another driver wouldn't let her merge into traffic, she didn't back off. She gunned the engine, then swerved into the lane inches ahead of the other vehicle's bumper. The maneuver sent her SUV skidding sideways. Her vehicle flipped, tumbled off the road, and landed upside down in a ditch.

Although Cassie walked away from the accident, a couple of her passengers spent days recovering in the hospital. Her crowd didn't hide what they thought of Cassie. They poured out phrases like "What were you thinking?" and "You're so incredibly selfish!" and "You're always like this!"

Cassie had to face the real consequences of her combative, peacebreaking lifestyle. Her friends finally shook loose from their peacefaking. It took the accident to jolt all of them into understanding that they needed to speak up sooner about destructive behavior.

Peacemaking: a Better Way

Anyone can fake peace. Or break peace. It takes no imagination at all to plot a quick escape or a brutal attack when you find yourself in a painful conflict. But only by working at peace do you have any chance of finding true justice and

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genuine harmony. Making peace is also your best shot at keeping conflict from spinning out of control.

Remember? The *peacemaker-peacemaker-peacemaker* hill is solid ice. Go too far to the left or right, and you shoot down the slippery slope.

That's exactly how conflict works. You lose your grip, then start the slide. The farther you go, the faster you hurtle downward. The more extreme your response, the greater your losses in time, friendships, work, money, or a clean conscience. The farthest ends can even result in death.

Even when peacemaking and peacebreaking don't result in suicide or murder, there's still a problem: neither response solves your issue. The trouble rarely stops. Peacemaking and peacebreaking always result in shattered connections.

That's not all. For Christians, peacemaking and peacebreaking wreak havoc in the worst of ways: they trash your ability to showcase Christ. Whether you're cut off by coldness or sweating it out in hot battle, no one pays attention when you try to tell them about the love of Jesus. Picture Cassie, for example, crashing that SUV and then going to the hospital to pray for her injured friends. No one will tolerate that—unless, that is, she engages in peacemaking to repair the relationship.

The Core of Conflict

Do you want to prevent the problems that result from faking or breaking peace? You can start by exploring what the Bible says about what conflict is and how to deal with it. Peacemaking doesn't come naturally to anyone. Yet God tells us in his Word why clashes occur. And he explains how his gracious love powers your efforts to work out conflicts. The more you understand and obey what God teaches, the more effectively you can settle your disagreements.

You start by understanding what conflict is:

Your Amazing Opportunity

Conflict is a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates your goals or desires—or someone else's.

That definition covers everything from little disagreements to big blowups to hurt feelings to damaged property. Don't miss the underlying point: conflict happens when you are at odds with another person over what you think, want, or do.

Good Conflict, Bad Conflict

Conflict isn't always bad. The Bible teaches that some differences are natural. Good. Rooted in our God-given individuality. So human beings are bound to have varying opinions, convictions, desires, perspectives, and priorities. Many differences aren't about right or wrong; they are simply the result of personal preferences. If we handle disagreements well, they stimulate dialogue, creativity, and change. They keep life interesting!

You don't have to scan far in the Bible to see that even Christian leaders experienced conflict and came out better for it. In Acts 15:36–41 the great apostle Paul had such a sharp disagreement with his preaching partner, Barnabas, that they split up. Paul didn't think a junior partner, Mark, was mature enough to do ministry. So Paul picked a new sidekick, Silas, and headed for Lystra. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus. That clash sounds regrettable until you realize that their solution effectively doubled their missionary output. By going to Lystra, Paul also met his dear friend Timothy. And later Paul came to call Mark his fellow worker (see Philemon 24) and useful helper (see 2 Tim. 4:11). Conflict, handled well, became beneficial.

Trust—and Act

It's normal to see conflict as a hassle or a chance to make others do what you want. But conflict is actually a phenomenal

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opportunity to demonstrate God's love and power. Gaining real skills in turning a tense situation into something good starts with choosing to handle conflict God's way.

That takes trust. It's counting on God's care for you. It's relying on his accurate understanding of a complex situation. Trust also means you look to God for strength to follow his ways, even when they're the exact opposite of what you feel like doing. You can spot all of these truths wrapped together in Proverbs 3:5–6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." When you believe that God looks out for you, you can quit fearing what others might do to hurt you.

Real trust in God is no abstract thought or warm feeling. Trust in the Lord empowers you to choose to act in obedience to his commands. You live by his sure instructions, demonstrating unwavering confidence that his ways are your best possible pick. Every time you imitate the humility, mercy, and forgiveness of Jesus, you show your world the awe-inspiring Lord you follow.

Benefiting Others

When you decide to solve conflict God's way, something astonishing happens. Instead of thinking only of yourself, you seize opportunities to serve others. The result is that you benefit them in ways you never imagined.

Serving might not look like what you expect. You can meet spiritual, emotional, or material needs. You might tell them about Jesus or just model how others should act in that situation. You could even help others spot where they have done wrong and need to change.

Suppose you're watching how a friend gets along—or doesn't—with his family at home. You see him sinking fast. Not long ago he would occasionally sass his parents. Now he

Your Amazing Opportunity

openly rebels against their every instruction. You might think a supportive friend should shut up and give the guy his space. But you have an opportunity to intervene in the situation. That's the word in Galatians 6:1: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." Helping your friend wake up and understand the mess he is causing benefits him far more than your silence.

Imagine how you would impact your world if you saw conflict as a chance to serve others just as Jesus has served you. To the world around you, caring for others sounds absurd. But Jesus commanded you to stretch: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27–28).

Growing to Be Like Christ

There's a more personal payoff to solving conflict God's way: you jump into a process that causes you to grow to be like Christ. Maybe you know that from the day you first believed in Jesus, God began working in you. His job won't be done until the day your life expires. And here's the thing: conflict is one of the premier ways he helps you develop a greater resemblance to Jesus.

Conflict reminds you of your weaknesses and compels you to depend on him. It helps you to practice new, Jesus-like attitudes and habits. Just like working out promotes new muscle growth, the daily exercise of following Jesus strengthens you from the inside out. With the right outlook, you stop worrying about exiting a conflict and start enjoying the fact that God is at work in you.

Back in high school I (Kevin) seemed like a nice enough guy. But when others annoyed me, I used words to slice and stab. Much of my talk with friends was nonstop sarcastic reviews of everyone and everything in sight. When I spent a summer in South America on a mission trip with three

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dozen new friends from all over the country, I had to find better ways to deal with conflict. Doing two weeks of trip training in a swamp, sharing tents for much of the summer, and baking in the sun as we laid concrete blocks gave me endless opportunities to choose a better way.

I didn't realize how much I had changed until I got back home. A girl I had grown up with asked me why I was so different. She specifically noticed that I didn't trash-talk people anymore. I had only one answer: I was as surprised as anyone that God had changed me.

Your Honored Place

There's one more amazing fact about dealing with clashes God's way: *in every conflict situation, God gives you the opportunity to act as his on-the-ground representative.* He wants you to talk and act as he would—watching out for his goals, displaying his right way of doing things, creatively working toward real peace by maximizing the abilities and spiritual resources he has put in you. If you do that, you're acting as God's steward—an honored person trusted to safeguard a master's treasure (see Luke 12:42). When the Lord examines your work, he wants to be able to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matt. 25:21).

This might sound too over-the-top idealistic to work in real life. But you really have only three alternatives. You can be a peacefaker, burying problems until they rise again to bury you. You can be a peacebreaker, dealing harshly with your opponents until you have no one left who dares to call you friend. Or you can become a peacemaker, growing in your ability to deal confidently and effectively with every kind of clash—finding God's way of handling conflict, an approach that truly works.

It's your choice.